

Excerpts on Essence and Notion

Hegel reading texts given by Andy Blunden

Reciprocity, or Action & Reaction

§156, part

“Reciprocal action realises the causal relation in its complete development. It is this relation, therefore, in which reflection usually takes shelter when the conviction grows that things can no longer be studied satisfactorily from a causal point of view, on account of the infinite progress already spoken of. Thus in historical research the question may be raised in a first form, whether the character and manners of a nation are the cause of its constitution and its laws, or if they are not rather the effect. Then, as the second step, the character and manners on one side and the Constitution and laws on the other are conceived on the principle of reciprocity: and in that case the cause in the same connection as it is a cause will at the same time be an effect, and vice versa.

“The same thing is done in the study of Nature, and especially of living organisms.”

(Shorter Logic, §156n)

Content and Form

§ 133

Outside one another as the phenomena in this phenomenal world are, they form a totality, and are wholly contained in their self-relatedness. In this way the self-relation of the phenomenon is completely specified, it has the **Form** in itself: and because it is in this identity, has it as essential subsistence. So it comes about that the form is **Content**: and in its phase is the **Law of the Phenomenon**. When the form, on the contrary, is not reflected into self, it is equivalent to the negative of the phenomenon, to the non-independent and changeable: and that sort of form is the indifferent or External Form.

The essential point to keep in mind about the opposition of Form and Content is that the content is not formless, but has the form in its own self, quite as much as the form is external to it. There is thus a doubling of form. At one time it is reflected into itself; and then is identical with the content. At another time it is not reflected into itself, and then it is external existence, which does not at all affect the content. We are here in presence, implicitly, of the absolute correlation of content and form: viz., their reciprocal revulsion, so that content is nothing but the revulsion of form into content, and form nothing but the revulsion of content into form. This mutual revulsion is one of the most important laws of thought. But it is not explicitly brought out before the Relations of **Substance** and **Causality**.

Form and content are a pair of terms frequently employed by the reflective understanding, especially with a habit of looking on the content as the essential and independent, the form on the contrary as the unessential and dependent. Against this it is to be noted that both are in fact equally essential; and that, while a formless *content* can be as little found as a formless *matter*, the two (content and matter) are distinguished by this circumstance, that matter, though implicitly not without form, still in its existence manifests a disregard of form, whereas the content, as such, is what it is only because the matured form is included in it. Still the form still suffers from externality. In a book, for instance, it certainly has no bearing upon the content, whether it be written or printed, bound in paper or in leather. That however does not in the least imply that apart from such an indifferent and external form, the content of the book is itself formless. There are undoubtedly books enough which even in reference to their content may well be styled formless: but want of form in this case is the same as bad form, and means the defect of the right form, not the absence of all form whatever. So far is this right

form from being unaffected by the content that it is rather the content itself. A work of art that wants the right form is for that very reason no right or true work of art: and it is a bad way of excusing an artist, to say that the content of his works is good and even excellent, though they want the right form. Real works of art are those where content and form exhibit a thorough identity. The content of the Iliad, it may be said, is the Trojan war, and especially the wrath of Achilles. In that we have everything, and yet very little after all; for the Iliad is made an Iliad by the poetic form, in which that content is moulded. The content of Romeo and Juliet may similarly be said to be the ruin of two lovers through the discord between their families: but something more is needed to make Shakespeare's immortal tragedy.

In reference to the relation of form and content in the field of science, we should recollect the difference between philosophy and the rest of the sciences. The latter are **finite**, because their mode of thought, as a merely formal act, derives its content from without. Their content therefore is not known as moulded from within through the thoughts which lie at the ground of it, and form and content do not thoroughly interpenetrate each other. This partition disappears in philosophy, and thus justifies its title of infinite knowledge. Yet even philosophic thought is often held to be a merely formal act; and that logic, which confessedly deals only with thoughts qua thoughts, is merely formal, is especially a foregone conclusion. And if content means no more than what is palpable and obvious to the senses, all philosophy and logic in particular must be at once acknowledged to be void of content, that is to say, of content perceptible to the senses. Even ordinary forms of thought, however, and the common usage of language, do not in the least restrict the appellation of content to what is perceived by the senses, or to what has a being in place and time.

A book without content is, as every one knows, not a book with empty leaves, but one of which the content is as good as none. We shall find as the last result on closer analysis, that by what is called content an educated mind means nothing but the presence and power of thought. But this is to admit that thoughts are not empty forms without affinity to their content, and that in other spheres as well as in art the truth and the sterling value of the content essentially depend on the content showing itself identical with the form.

‘The Shorter Logic’, §133, Form and Content

IX. The Notion

§ 160

The Notion is the principle of freedom, the power of **substance** self-realised. It is a systematic whole, in which each of its constituent functions is the very total which the notion is, and is put as indissolubly one with it. Thus in its self-identity it has original and complete determinateness.

The position taken up by the notion is that of absolute **idealism**. Philosophy is a knowledge through notions because it sees that what on other grades of consciousness is taken to have Being, and to be naturally or immediately independent, is but a constituent stage in the Idea. In the logic of understanding, the notion is generally reckoned a mere form of thought, and treated as a general conception. It is to this inferior view of the notion that the assertion refers, so often urged on behalf of the heart and sentiment, that notions as such are something dead, empty, and abstract. The case is really quite the reverse.

The notion is, on the contrary, the principle of all life, and thus possesses at the same time a character of thorough **concreteness**. That it is so follows from the whole logical movement up to this point, and need not be here proved. The contrast between **form and content**, which is thus used to criticise the notion when it is alleged to be merely formal, has, like all the other contrasts upheld by reflection, been already left behind and overcome dialectically or through itself. The notion, in short, is what contains all the earlier categories of thought merged in it. It certainly is a form, but an infinite and creative form which includes, but at the same time releases from itself, the fullness of all content. And so too the notion may, if it be wished, be styled abstract, if the name concrete is restricted to the concrete facts of sense or of immediate perception. For the notion is not palpable to the touch, and when we are engaged with it, hearing and seeing must quite fail us. And yet, as it was before remarked, the notion is a true concrete; for the reason that it involves Being and Essence, and the total wealth of these two spheres with them, merged in the unity of thought.

If, as was said at an earlier point, **the different stages of the logical idea are to be treated as a series of definitions of the Absolute**, the definition which now results for us is that the Absolute is the Notion. That

necessitates a higher estimate of the notion, however, than is found in formal conceptualist Logic, where the notion is a mere form of our subjective thought, with no original content of its own. But if Speculative Logic thus attaches a meaning to the term notion so very different from that usually given, it may be asked why the same word should be employed in two contrary acceptations, and an occasion thus given for confusion and misconception. The answer is that, great as the interval is between the speculative notion and the notion of **Formal Logic**, a closer examination shows that the deeper meaning is not so foreign to the general usages of language as it seems at first sight. We speak of the **deduction** of a content from the notion, e.g. of the specific provisions of the law of property from the notion of property; and so again we speak of tracing back these material details to the notion. We thus recognise that the notion is no mere form without a content of its own: for if it were, there would be in the one case nothing to deduce from such a form, and in the other case to trace a given body of fact back to the empty form of the notion would only rob the fact of its specific character, without making it understood.

‘The Shorter Logic’, §160

Development

§ 161

The onward movement of the notion is no longer either a transition into, or a reflection on something else, but **Development**. For in the notion, the elements distinguished are without more ado at the same time declared to be identical with one another and with the whole, and the specific character of each is a free being of the whole notion.

Transition into something else is the dialectical process within the range of **Being: reflection (bringing something else into light), in the range of Essence**. The movement of the Notion is development: by which that only is explicit which is already implicitly present. In the world of nature it is organic life that corresponds to the grade of the notion. Thus e.g. the plant is developed from its germ. The germ virtually involves the whole plant, but does so only ideally or in thought: and it would therefore be a mistake to regard the development of the root, stem, leaves, and other different parts of the plant, as meaning that they were *realiter* present, but in a very minute form, in the germ. That is the so-called 'box-within-box' hypothesis; a theory which commits the mistake of supposing an actual existence of what is at first found only as a postulate of the completed thought. The truth of the hypothesis on the other hand lies in its perceiving that in the process of development the notion keeps to itself and only gives rise to alteration of form, without making any addition in point of content. It is this nature of the notion — this manifestation of itself in its process as a development of its own self which is chiefly in view with those who speak of innate ideas, or who, like Plato, describe all learning merely as reminiscence. Of course that again does not mean that everything which is embodied in a mind, after that mind has been formed by instructions had been present in that mind beforehand, in its definitely expanded shape.

The movement of the notion is as it were to be looked upon merely as plan: the other which it sets up is in reality not an other. Or, as it is expressed in the teaching of Christianity: not merely has God created a World which confronts him as an other; he has also from all eternity begotten a Son in whom he, a Spirit, is at home with himself.

'The Shorter Logic', §160

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